

Songs for the Waiting

*Devotions Inspired by the
Hymns of Advent*

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1

Forgive and Forget?

Read Psalm 137

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

—“*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,*” verse 1

Alongside Babylon’s streams,
there we sat down,
crying because we remembered Zion.
We hung our lyres up
in the trees there
because that’s where our captors asked us to sing;
our tormentors requested songs of joy:
“Sing us a song about Zion!” they said.
But how could we possibly sing
the LORD’s song on foreign soil?

—*Psalm 137:1–4*

Our journey begins with the best-known Advent hymn of them all. Over and against the plastic good cheer of our commercialized Christmas culture, the first verse of this hymn calls us to acknowledge reality as we experience it: in mournfulness, loneliness, captivity.

Often, those particular emotions run deepest in the context of broken relationships with others. Perhaps, without even batting an eye, you can name instances in which you have been wronged or where you have caused harm to someone else. In these situations we often hear the old adage “forgive and forget.” It’s a phrase intended to help us cope with these moments, and you may have even offered that prescription to someone else. But here’s the problem: forgetting is impossible. To attempt to do so would be to behave in contradiction to the way our God-given minds are intended to work. Our capacity to remember contributes to our survival, and it is simply not reasonable to

expect that we can switch our ability to remember on and off or to pick and choose what we will remember and what we will forget. The truth is, the more we *try* to forget about something that has happened to us, the more that memory becomes even *more* vivid and hard to forget.

A more possible—and perhaps more healing—course of action is to move those memories to the periphery, out of their position of governing influence in mind, heart, and spirit, to a place where the power they wield on us is lessened, and we can move on with confidence and joy, just as the chorus of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” suggests.

This concept of forgiveness is the connecting thread between the hymn and Psalm 137. In both, Israel is haunted by a longing for home, lured by the memories of what life was like before the hardship and suffering. Rather than inviting us to forget the past, these texts call us to embrace that longing and begin to hope for a brighter day ahead.

For you, Advent may be a time of pushing the difficult memories of your life to the periphery by longing for the arrival of new hope and promise. It involves daring to believe that God’s light will come to you in real and unexpected ways, despite all the evidence to the contrary. And in those situations in which you find it difficult to believe in a God who comes near you as Emmanuel, then it is incumbent on you to surround yourself with people who can support you in your journey. People who can say to you, “Even though you have a hard time believing in God’s faithfulness, I will believe it on your behalf until you are able to believe it for yourself.”

That is why it is significant that Psalm 137 is written from the perspective of the first-person plural. “There *we* sat down . . . *our* captors asked *us* to sing . . .” To fully engage Advent this season, it is best to journey with companions. Look for people who can identify with your hurts, who will not judge you for the way you demonstrate your human struggles, and who can encourage you with truthfulness and love to change your attitude and your behavior.

Ultimately, Psalm 137 invites you into a simple exercise of naming and acknowledging the ways in which you experience exile in your life today. How are you longing for home? How do you find yourself in the midst of a “foreign land,” surrounded by an environment that stifles your faith and fills you with doubt? Maybe you feel a temptation to succumb to the culture around you and give up on your faith, or at least water down your convictions to acquiesce to your surroundings. Maybe you can really identify with that first verse, and you simply feel like shedding a tear next to your figurative waters of Babylon.

As you name and acknowledge your own exile experience today, resist the temptation to escape it by seeking temporary pleasures or by trying to forget about them. Instead, lift up your exile experience in prayer, perhaps in a creative way. You might follow the lead of the psalm itself and sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”—a song that captures that sense of longing for home—and offer that word and melody as an offering to God. You might simply choose to write about exile as a living record of how God is moving into and within your life, even in a foreign land.

The Diary of Anne Frank was just such a record of exile, a young girl describing her family’s life in hiding during World War II. Anne did not use her journal as a way of ignoring her exile or forgetting about her pain. Instead, she used it as a way to both name her suffering and embrace hope. She exhibited a remarkable resilience in the way she anticipated life, especially in this entry:

I want to be useful or bring enjoyment to all people, even those I’ve never met. I want to go on living even after my death! And that’s why I’m so grateful to God for having given me this gift, which I can use to develop myself and to express all that’s inside me!¹

This is the call of Advent: to surrender ourselves fully to a God who will come to set us free, to use our gifts for the benefit

of others, and even to utilize our capacity to remember. For it is in remembrance of the past that we can claim healing for our future.

Reflection

In what ways are you experiencing captivity and exile in your life right now? What do you need to surrender to God in order to heal from the wounds of your past?

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for your constant readiness to forgive and for the steadfastness of your grace. Teach me to forgive others, and myself, and to move into the abundant life you desire for all your people. Amen.